

Stranger SKAM by Jamz24

Category: SKAM (TV), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Childhood Friends, Alternate Universe - Stranger Things Fusion, Character Crackships, Characters have been aged up, Crack Crossover, Crossovers & Fandom Fusions, Evak - Freeform, Inspired by SKAM (TV), Inspired by Stranger Things (TV 2016), It's the 80s so they're a bit less worldly cuz no internet!, Multi, SKAM, SKAM - Freeform, SKAM characters take on Stranger Things storylines, SKAM/StrangerThings, They're all about 16/17

Language: English

Characters: Chris Berg (Barb Holland crack), Eva Kviig Mohn, Eva Kviig Mohn (Eleven), Even Bech Naesheim (Steve Harrington crack), Even Bech Næsheim, Isak Valtersen, Isak Valtersen's Parents, Jonas Noah Vasquez, Jonas Vasquez (Mike Wheeler), Magnus Fossbakken, Magnus Fossbakken (Dustin Henderson), Mahdi Disi, Mahdi Disi (Lucas Sinclair), Sana Bakkoush, Sana Bakkoush (Eight crack), The Doctor (Martin Brenner crack), Thea Vasquez (Nancy Wheeler)

Relationships: Eva Kviig Mohn & Isak Valtersen, Eva Kviig Mohn/Jonas Noah Vasquez, Even Bech Næsheim/Isak Valtersen, Isak Valtersen & Jonas Noah Vasquez, Magnus Fossbakken/Isak Valtersen, Mahdi Disi & Isak Valtersen

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Summary:

A SKAM version of Stranger Things!

It's the 80's in the little town of Backwoods, County Nowhere (somewhere between Oslo and Indiana). A boy disappears, and a girl is found...

Think you know the story? You may well be surprised ... or if you don't know it, you don't need to - all will be made clear as we go along...

1. The Vanishing of Isak Valtersen

Author's Note:

- For [cuteandtwisted](#).

Inspired by the Norwegian online TV show SKAM and the Netflix series Stranger Things (both series mashup). I love the character tropes both shows use and had fun writing this! It starts on recognisable ground, but it'll very quickly go places you don't expect ...

As the Stranger Things cast are all around 12, and the SKAM cast are all around 17, I've worked it so they're about 15/16 in this fic. They're a bit more innocent and less worldly than the SKAM crew (it's the Eighties and they've got no internet lmao) but they're older teens so there's some more adult stuff in there too. I've cracked around with some characters too.

My google is a mess of Eighties searches, but if there's any Eighties reference I haven't included, throw it at me and I'll stick it in, hehe

Dark skies brooded over the tiny town of Backwoods. The winds lashed at the trees that gave the town its name, whipping the branches into a frenzy. Leaves skittered over the ground as if they were being chased, and from behind two large gates came the *creak, creak, creak* of a metal sign swinging in the wind.

DANGER! it read. KEEP OUT!

Somewhere, deep underneath the ground, something woke. Something ancient, something soiled, something wicked.

It felt the change in the air above, it sensed the coming storm.

I'm here, it murmured. I'm coming.

"I've had enough of this!" Isak threw his Atari console across the room irritably. "Can't we play something else for a change?"

"You're only pissed because I always beat you at Pac-Man," said Jonas, grinning, still busy on his console, watching the small black circles chase each other over the screen, snapping at each other. "I got all the fruit and power pellets that last level, you just got eaten by a ghost. You never get higher than the hundredth level so I don't know why I bother playing you."

"I'm bored watching you guys," said Magnus, chewing loudly on a Jawbreaker, his SuperRange baseball cap jammed over his long curly hair. "Can't we play Super Mario or something?"

"You can't even play Donkey Kong," said Isak, punching him, and Magnus kicked back at him. "I'm awesome at Donkey Kong. You're the one whose mom hates computers so much she doesn't even let you have a Walkman."

"What tapes have you got?" Mahdi was searching through Jonas's shelves. "What's this? You've got *Madonna*?"

"Madonna's a feminist icon, man," drawled Jonas. "Chicks love it."

"Boys," shouted Jonas's mom from downstairs. "Ten minutes, and I'm chucking you all out."

The boys sent up a group wail.

"Mom, do they really have to go yet?" shouted back Jonas. "We're okay up here."

His mother put her head round the door. "Yes they do, Jonas, and you have to get cleaned up and look presentable. Thea's boyfriend is coming over for dinner."

The door closed behind her, and Isak looked at Jonas, eyebrow raised. “Since when is Thea dating someone?”

Thea was Jonas’s older sister, and as far as they all knew, she’d never had a boyfriend in her life. She was always walking around with her head stuck in a book, and had never seemed to care about boys before.

Jonas looked amazed. “I’ve no idea. Nobody tells me anything. It’s probably why Mom’s making such an effort, though. Probably scared he’ll dump her or something.”

“Wow,” said Magnus smirking, “bet he’s a librarian or something.”

“Or a science nerd,” put in Mahdi.

“What’s wrong with being a science nerd?” asked Isak huffily.

“Oh nothing,” said Mahdi airily, “just you might end up like all those weirdos up by the lab in the woods.”

Above Backwoods there was a chemical facility, bounded by barbed wire and surrounded by a forest. There were lots of warning signs – HAZCHEM! – DANGER! – so their parents had forbidden them to hang out there. Needless to say, they often did, for a crafty smoke or a beer, or when one of them wanted to make out with someone ... which (unfortunately for them) very rarely happened.

“Well I guess this means we’re having a special dinner at least,” said Jonas, stretching. “Mom’ll probably lay out a huge banquet for this guy. All Thea can do is toast a Pop Tart.”

Isak flushed and looked down. Pop Tarts were very often all he had for dinner, mostly the brown peanut butter ones that you took out of a foil packet and heated up in the toaster. It was all his mom was able to cook sometimes when she was bad, unless she could mix up the odd bowl of Angel Delight from a sachet. Lately the voices in her head had been growing louder and louder, and Isak had needed to pretty much take care of himself, make sure he had clean clothes for school and stuff like that.

And it wasn’t that his mum *disliked* computers, although he let Mahdi

think that – it was that she never had any money enough for the rent, let alone a Walkman.

“You okay man?” Jonas was looking at him carefully, and punched him on the shoulder.

“I’m fine,” Isak lied, and got up off the bed, pretending to look for his anorak so Jonas wouldn’t see his face.

From outside the window there came the loud, throbbing hum of a motorbike, growing louder and louder as it came down the drive. The boys looked at each other. *Nobody* they knew had a motorbike.

“Who on earth’s that?” asked Magnus, but at the same time Jonas’s mom shouted. “Right boys! Time to go!”

“That’s never Thea’s date?” said Isak, and instantly they all rushed to the window and flung open the curtains. Dark was falling outside, but the porch light threw a tiny bit of light over the drive, as a huge Harley Davidson low-rider motorbike drew up and parked outside with a screech.

“Holy crap,” said Magnus, “*that’s* Thea’s new boyfriend?”

Isak looked down. Underneath the window, Thea was sitting on the back of the chopper, with her arms around the waist of – Isak strained to see properly. He couldn’t get much of a view, because Magnus’s head was in the way, but the sound of voices greeting each other floated up from below. It sounded like Jonas’s mom was really piling on the charm.

“Oh God,” said Jonas, slapping his forehead, “tell me he’s not one of the Penetrator crew.”

The Penetrators were a group of boys in their final year. Some of them hung around on motorbikes, and loved to play stupid games like chasing their pushbikes and trying to run them off the road. It was the most entertainment they could find in Backwoods.

“I don’t recognise him,” said Magnus, practically hanging out of the window in enthusiasm. “I don’t think even any of the P-squad have a real Harley Davison. That guy must have some serious cash.”

Isak looked at Mahdi. “You wanna ride home together?”

“Sure,” said Mahdi. He had a new BMX which easily outperformed Isak’s old banana-seat bike, but he’d always ride pace with Isak and wouldn’t shoot off and leave him, unlike Magnus who loved to show off his Aviva Speedo. “Take the trail up by the woods?”

“You’re on. Bye Jonas,” and Isak swung himself out of the door and down the stairs, Mahdi following after him.

“Hey, what about me?” shouted Magnus behind them, but they were already in the hallway, and Thea and her date were coming in the front door.

Downstairs was bright lights, fresh-cut flowers and cheerful, cooking smells; Jonas’s mom had evidently pulled out all the stops to impress her daughter’s date. It always made Isak a little sad when he saw other people’s houses; his own house was only lit by dim cheap bulbs and never smelled of anything nice, especially when his mom was having one of her bad days.

“Welcome, Even!” Mrs Vasquez was saying, her voice all girlish and fluttery. “Thea’s told me so much about you!”

Isak stopped short, and Magnus almost collided with him from behind.

At the door stood a tall boy, dressed in biking leathers and carrying a motorcycle helmet. Underneath he wore a Boy George T-shirt and his blonde hair was cut, streaked and tipped with pink like one of the singers in Duran Duran. He looked like he’d walked off some kind of Spandau Ballet pop video, and in the small town of Backwoods, where everyone wore Hoosiers T-shirts, check shirts and baseball caps, he stuck out like an absolute sore thumb.

Isak was pretty sure he wasn’t one of the Penetrator squad – and was that – *eyeliner?*?”

“Oh!” Mrs Vasquez was laughing embarrassedly. “What an interesting outfit you have, Even. I was thinking it was fancy dress dinner tonight!”

“*Mom!*” Thea spoke up for the first time. “It’s the New Romantic look, don’t you know *anything?*”

Thea was looking different too; she wore a *Frankie Says* baggy T-shirt, tight black jeans and thick black eye makeup like Madonna. She looked up at Even with an expression full of adoration.

“Hello Mrs Vasquez!” Even’s voice was low and cheerful, and his smile lit up his face like a sudden blast of sunshine. “I’m so glad to meet you!”

Isak stood very still on the stairs. He had never seen anyone smile like *that* before.

“Jonas?” Mrs Vasquez looked round. “Oh, these are his friends, Isak, Mahdi and Magnus. Can one of you get Jonas please? It’s very impolite for him to stay upstairs in his room. Tell him to come down and say hello.”

“I’ll ... I’ll do it,” said Isak, turning around and running up the stairs. *Who the hell is that*, he thought amazedly to himself. *How did nerdy Thea manage to get a guy like him?*

“Jonas,” he said. “Your mom says you have to go downstairs. Thea’s boyfriend’s here.”

“Ugh,” sulked Jonas, getting up and pulling on a clean shirt. “Do you want to stay for dinner? I can ask Mom specially.”

Isak hesitated. Part of him wanted to – really, *really* wanted to – but Mahdi was calling for him downstairs and they’d already promised to ride back together so – He shook his head.

“No, I’m good. Next time, maybe.”

Jonas winked at him. “Okay, man. Wish me luck with Thea and her biker boy.”

Deep below ground, *something* was stirring.

Eva felt it, even before she opened her eyes. Something dark, something wild and desperate. It searched at her, tugged at her mind, probed into her brain.

Leave me alone, she thought angrily. *Get back!* and the thing retreated, snuffling and evil, coiling around the remains of her memory.

I'm still here, it thought back at her wickedly. *I'm never going away.*

Eva opened her eyes with a start. She was still sitting in the same, glass-walled chamber in the same darkened corridor. To either side of her stretched identical rows of rooms, all boxed-in, all barred, under the huge concrete walls that held her down.

She went to the barred door and peered out. Above her, the number 11 was illuminated in a pale glow.

"Sana," she whispered. "Sana, are you ready?"

From chamber number 8 across the corridor, Sana looked at her. Her dark eyes were set and determined. "Ready."

"Okay," said Eva, shakily. "Come on, let's do this."

Sana closed her eyes and concentrated. Eva did the same. She felt the air suddenly thicken around her, as if she was being squeezed under unbearable pressure. A thin trickle of blood snaked its way out of her nose and down her lip.

Who am I, she thought to herself. *Who am I.*

"More," encouraged Sana in her ear. "Summon the storm."

Night had fallen and it looked like a storm was coming. Branches thrashed in the gathering wind outside, and they knew they had to get home soon. As they collected their bikes, Isak was pulling around his old Beaman when he suddenly saw – it had a puncture. The tyre had burst, and the metal scraped agonisingly along the road.

Ugh, he thought to himself. *That's all I need.*

"Guys, wait!" he called, but Mahdi and Magnus were already at the top of the drive. "I've got a flat."

"Hurry up!" shouted back Magnus. "It's gonna rain soon!"

"Need a hand?" said a voice behind him, and turning, Isak saw Even leaning on the doorway behind him, smoking a cigarette.

"Ummm, I've bust my tyre," said Isak, wondering why he wasn't able to put his words together in the way he normally did. "I've got a kit somewhere, but I've ..."

I've never actually fixed my own tyre, he thought to himself. *That's something Jonas usually does for me.*

"Want me to take a look?" Even twitched his cigarette from his lips and flicked it in a shower of sparks into the bushes.

"Thanks," gasped Isak, his ears turning extremely red. "That would be great, thanks."

Even examined his tyre, spinning it gently in his large hands. "I think you've got a hole in the outer, but I think the inner tube is pretty much okay. Oh look, here's the nail." He opened the kit and extracted the tyre plaster, and with a quick flick of his finger pulled out the nail, taping it up. "If I pump it up now, you'll have enough to get home. You don't live far, do you?"

"No, just the other end of town," said Isak, watching as Even adjusted the bike nozzle and gave it a few quick pumps. Isak tried not to watch the blond hair falling in his face too intently, or the precise movements of his fingers as he squeezed the tyre and nodded in satisfaction. "I think you're hard enough now. Safe ride home."

Isak gasped a brief thanks, and pedalled up the hill to where his impatient friends were waiting for him.

“What’s bike-boy like then?” asked Magnus curiously.

“Uhhh, I don’t know,” said Isak. “He just fixed my tyre.”

“I wonder if he’s in Thea’s year,” said Mahdi. “He looks a bit older though.”

A sudden crack of thunder sounded above them, and Isak looked up. The sky looked black and dangerous; boiling clouds swirling around in a whirlpool of black and silver. “We’d better go.”

They free-wheeled down the hill for a while, taking the trail round the edge of the woods, where the barbed wire of the facility could just be seen. KEEP OUT! DANGER!

The wild night lent a peculiar, ghostly quality to the trees, they strained in the wind with twisted limbs, lashing over the road and making them swerve. Isak’s dodgy tyre bumped and wobbled as his friends’ faster bikes swept away ahead of him.

“Wait!” he cried, and the next moment his tyre hit a particularly sharp stone –

And above him a hideous scar of lightning blazed out of the electric storm flickering above –

CRACK - !

And the next moment the little air in his tyre gave way and he was somersaulting over the handlebars, turning over and over –

“Isak!” Mahdi’s panicked voice echoed from a distance. “Isaaaak!”

He never hit the ground.

Blood poured from Eva's nose as she sat cross-legged in concentration, the storm thickening and boiling around her. Across the corridor, Sana's eyes were closed in pain, her entire thoughts concentrated on the energy flickering between them. Alarms were ringing down the length of the facility, voices were shouting in the distance, but she kept her focus.

Around them the outlines of the facility slowly dimmed. Above them dead leaves blew in the wind, and the bark of decaying trees pressed through the transparent walls. *All dying, all rotten*, Eva thought to herself despairingly.

Shut up! Sana thought at her angrily. *Keep going!*

Who am I? Eva thought to herself desperately. *I am –*

The trees were so close now, she could almost touch them, see their flickering shapes and hear the rustle –

Help! Help!

A figure of a boy stumbled in front of her, a boy of about her age, staring around him at the hideous woods that encircled him, lost and confused.

Who are you? Eva thought at him, amazed. *How did you get here?*

The boy gazed at her. *I don't know*, he thought back desperately. *I don't know who I am.*

“Now!” Sana's voice was in her ear, all around her, plucking at her thoughts, pulling her onwards. “Now, Eva!”

No, wait! thought the boy at her. *Wait!*

Eva gritted her teeth and summoned all her strength.

CRACK - !

And she was suddenly turning over and over, spinning through the

shattered air, until she hit the ground with a rough thump.

Ow, she thought agonisedly, *I've hurt myself, that really hurt –*

A moment later she realised she was no longer in the facility.

She was lying face down on a damp forest floor, mud sticking to her face and leaves in her hair. Above her the first splashes of rain were starting to fall.

Oh my God, she thought confusedly. *I've done it. I've done it!*

She raised herself on her arms and stared about her. It was dark and she could see no further than a few metres in either direction, but she could see no wire, no chimneys, no signs of HAZARD or KEEP DOOR SHUT. The leaves above her were green, and the smells were rich and living, not rotten or decaying.

It was blissful. She couldn't help digging her fingers into the ground and joyfully smelling the mud, rubbing a leaf against her face, tasting a blade of grass.

I'm out, she thought. *I'm out!*

But she was cold. Her thin white facility gown clung around her, no protection from the icy winds. "Sana!" she hissed. "Sana!"

But there was no answer. She was completely and utterly alone.

Who am I? she thought? *Who am I?*

She looked up. *Tree*, she thought. *Yes, tree. I remember that. Stone. Wind. Rain.*

All these I remember.

She ran.

To be continued ...

The Finding of Eva Mohn

“Isak!” Mahdi ran wildly to the spot where his friend’s upturned bicycle lay, wheels still spinning blindly in the air. “Isak! Where did you go?”

“He’s not here!” Magnus puffed behind him. “He just disappeared into thin air!”

Mahdi looked up and down the rutted path. “I don’t get it! He was just here, and then he – ”

“You think he ran off?” asked Magnus in bafflement. “Ran up there into the woods?”

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t,” said Mahdi. “We’d have seen him, no?”

Behind them there was a searing hiss, like a breath of foul vapour, a sudden thickening of the air, a bending and pressure as if *something* was pressing on the trees behind them, making them bend like a painting or a stage set, as if the woods weren’t really *real*, and as they watched in terror, *something* came through the branches, something twisted, wrong, *impossible* –

“Oh my God!” wailed Mahdi. “What is it!”

“Aaaargh! I have no idea!” screamed Magnus. “Ruuuun!”

2. The Finding Of Eva Mohn

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonas goes on the hunt for Isak with Even's help, but on the way he encounters someone who's stranger than he ever thought possible ...

Notes for the Chapter:

Yay I'm totally enjoying writing this fic! Don't worry if you haven't watched Stranger Things - this is my version of it, after all - part Hawkins, part Twin Peaks - all you need to know is that a lot of supernatural shit is about to hit the fan with our favourite characters!

PREVIOUSLY ON STRANGER SKAM

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There was a searing hiss behind them, a sudden thickening of the air, a bending and pressure as if *something* was pressing on the trees behind them, making them bend like a painting or a stage set, as if the woods weren’t really *real*, and as they watched in terror, through them *something* came, something twisted, wrong, impossible –

“Oh my God!” wailed Magnus. “What is it!”

“Aaaargh! I have no idea!” screamed Mahdi. “Run!”

CHAPTER TWO: THE FINDING OF EVA MOHN

Jonas had had *enough*. He was sitting at dinner with his parents, his big sister Thea, and Thea’s new boyfriend Even, and he’d *totally* had enough of all of them.

It wasn’t particularly Even’s fault – he was okay, Jonas supposed, although dressed up fairly outrageously for Backwoods, with his Morten Harket pink-tipped mohawk and David Bowie eyeliner – and it wasn’t even really Thea, with her new-look Goth hair and angry Cyndi Lauper eye-make-up, it was more his mom, constantly on at him: *Jonas, take your elbows off the table. Jonas, pass Even the lemonade please, Jonas, stop yawning, we have guests present.*

“This is delicious, Mrs Vasquez,” said Even with another of his stellar, mother-charming smiles. “You really are an amazing cook.”

Mrs Vasquez dimpled and flushed and Jonas rolled his eyes. If he ever managed to get a girlfriend, he thought, he was *never* going to bring her for dinner back home. Not that there was much chance of *that* in Backwoods anyway. Despite his casual pretence to Mahdi – *chicks love Madonna* – girls were hardly *ever* interested in Jonas, they seemed bored with the fact he read books instead of comics, or the fact he actually listened to the news instead of watching endless re-runs of *The A Team*. It was only the smallest bit of consolation to him that they didn’t seem interested in his friends either. His small friendship group of Isak, Mahdi and Magnus was pretty much the uncoolest set in the school.

Upstairs in the den he could hear his CB radio console squawking away; he was pretty sure he could hear Magnus’s voice shouting something unintelligibly through their private channel, but every time he strained to listen, he would see his mom’s annoyed eyes on

him and he'd turn his attention back to his dinner, which didn't appear to be getting any smaller.

He didn't like lentils, but his mom had cooked them because apparently Even was a *vegetarian*, to top it all, and now apparently *Thea* had become a vegetarian too, and now his mom was nodding brightly along to Even's speech about how much better vegetables were for you than eating caged animals slaughtered in horrible conditions, and Jonas and his dad were exchanging looks over their uneaten vegetable casserole and thinking, *if I have to eat this every day for the rest of my life, I'd rather die too.*

The wind howled outside, and there was a crash as another of the slates fell off the roof. "Goodness," his mom said. "I've never seen this kind of storm in Backwoods before."

We have storms like this all the time, thought Jonas. *For the last five years at least.*

Five years ago, the chemical facility had taken over the hill above Backwoods, and cut down the tall line of firs that used to break the line of clouds rolling down from the north. They'd left the rest of the woods that gave Backwoods its name, but ever since then, the incoming winter storms had become worse and worse, often flooding the bottom street of town, and cutting Backwoods off from the highway for days.

"Global warming, probably," said Even, passing his plate over for second helpings. "That's often responsible for bad weather."

"*Global warming?*" His mom looked shocked. "Whatever is that?"

"It's the effect that all our pollution has had on the environment," explained Thea. "All our waste gases are released into the air, and they affect things like the temperature of the earth, and that can trigger storms and flooding and droughts."

"Well isn't that awful?" said his mom, confused. "But what can we do about it?"

"Stop all our endless making of stuff we don't need," said Even

instantly. “We produce too much waste gases and use up all our resources, but we’re poisoning ourselves at the same time.”

Jonas cast a quick glance around him at his house; all the latest gadgets that his mom loved buying - microwave, TV, video-player and sunbed – and grinned to himself. At least someone felt the same way he did.

“The global mentality is changing,” he said, quoting from a paper he was writing for school. “Capitalism lets us stuff ourselves with cheap food, but the poor of the earth suffer for it. They’re the ones working in factories for no pay to produce things we don’t need.”

Thea shot an amazed glance at her kid brother, and Even looked over at him and grinned. “That’s right. Now scientists are even saying that the ozone layer that protects us from the sun has been affected because of all the CFC’s we use in aerosols.”

“CFC’s?” asked his mom, patting her swept-up hairdo in consternation. “I don’t think we have any of those around here.”

“They’re the things you have in your hairspray, Mom,” said Jonas, unable to stop himself. “And in whipped cream dispensers and in our fridge.”

His mom gave a tight smile in response, and Even gave him a wink. “Your brother’s pretty smart, Thea.”

Jonas started to like Even just a *little* bit more.

They’d just started to serve out pudding, and Jonas was *finally* looking forward to eating something halfway decent – when there was a sudden flurry of banging on the front door, followed by voices shouting hysterically outside. Jonas pricked up his ears – that sounded like Magnus, all right – and yes, there was Mahdi’s face suddenly at the window, knocking on the panes so hard Jonas thought they would break.

“Boys! Boys!” Mrs Vasquez got to her feet, shooing Mahdi away from the window in horror. She opened the front door and Magnus and Mahdi tumbled into the front room in a wet heap.

“It’s coming! It’s coming!”

“Shut the door!” screamed Magnus. “Quick!”

Mahdi threw his back against the door and slammed it, and Jonas could see that they were soaked through and gasping for breath as if they’d run a marathon.

“Whatever’s going on?” stormed Mrs Vasquez, hands on hips. She was pissed that her lovely dinner-party had been broken up, Jonas thought, but even *she* could see the panic on Magnus and Mahdi’s faces.

“A – *thing!*” Mahdi managed to get out. “It was chasing us!”

“And Isak has disappeared!” shouted Magnus. “He fell off his bike up on the high road and he just – *vanished!*”

Jonas had got to his feet as soon as they fell in the door, and at *Isak has vanished* he ran over to them in shock. Was this some kind of stupid *joke*? But one look at Magnus’s terrified face made a jolt of panic shoot through his chest. Magnus wasn’t *capable* of pretending on this level, plus his friends were terrified of his mom when she got on her high horse.

“What do you mean, *vanished?*” he shouted, shaking Magnus. “You mean you left him up in the woods?”

“He, he hit a rut up by the woods track and fell off his bike,” supplied Mahdi, his eyes round and fearful. “But then – he just went. He wasn’t on the ground and we didn’t see him run up the hill.”

Magnus nodded frantically, gulping for air.

“ – and we went to look for him, and we thought he was playing a trick, but then we saw – ”

“ – there was this *thing*, and it was *looking* at us – ”

“ – and we’re worried it’s got hold of *Isak* – ”

“A *thing?*” asked Jonas’s dad suddenly. “Do you mean like a wildcat?”

Wildcats used to be fairly common in Backwoods, but since the facility had arrived most of them had disappeared because their habitat had been taken over.

“No, not a wildcat,” stammered Magnus. “It was like a – like a troll from *Dungeons and Dragons*, but it didn’t – it didn’t have a face.”

Jonas shook his head. Nothing made any sense, apart from *Isak has vanished*, and frightened as they were about the thing that they were talking about, he couldn’t figure it out. His best friend wasn’t the kind to play a stupid prank, and certainly not one to choose to be up on the wood track by himself in the middle of the storm. He felt suddenly anxious. Had the Penetrators decided to play one of their sick games on his friends as they rode home?

“Have you guys told Isak’s mom?” he asked and his friends shook their heads determinedly. “We just biked straight back here! There’s no way we were going past *that* again!”

Jonas’s dad got to his feet. “Well whatever’s happened, I don’t think we can be leaving Isak out in that storm by himself, wherever he is. I think I should drive these guys home and we can go past the woods track to see if we know where he’s got to.”

“I agree,” Even pushed his chair back. “We should go and look for him.”

“But we haven’t even had dessert!” wailed Mrs Vasquez. “You’re going to go out – in that weather – looking for a boy like – ”

For a boy like *that*, Jonas knew she meant. He knew his mom didn’t approve of his friendship with Isak, and looked down on his tiny pre-fab house that was always out of electricity, his odd mom and his shabby second-hand clothes. Evidently she thought that looking for a *boy like that* wasn’t a higher priority than her stupid pudding.

“I’m coming too,” he shouted, running for his coat. “He’s my best friend.”

“No, Jonas!” His mom turned on him. “You sit down, and you finish your food!”

“But – ” said Jonas, incredulously, but Mrs Vasquez pointed a warning finger at Magnus and Mahdi. “Mr. Vasquez will drive you boys home as you’re soaked through, and Jonas, you’re not going anywhere. I’m sure Isak is bored of his little trick and is back home by now.”

Mrs Vasquez turned to her husband. “If you’re going, then bring the car round quickly.” She flapped a hand to Magnus and Mahdi to follow him.

“Boys, go after him and get in the back, please.”

As the door closed behind them, Magnus frantically signalling *call me!* at Jonas, his mom sat down at the table and smoothed out her napkin. Jonas shot a glance at Thea and Even who still sat, shocked, staring at the table.

They looked just as horrified as he felt.

“Now,” said Mrs. Vasquez with an icy smile. “Who’s for blancmange?”

Jonas was upstairs, fuming, grappling with his CB radio, trying to call Magnus, who had his receiver set permanently plugged in to his baseball cap – but all he was getting on the line was hisses and squeaks and what sounded like breathy voices whispering to each other.

“Come in, Magnus!” he shouted desperately into the transmitter for the thousandth time. “What’s going on out there?”

He thought he could hear Magnus speaking, but reception wasn’t great up in the woods, and from what he’d seen, his radio was probably wet through. He bit his fingernails and squinted through the window, at the rain driving against the house and the flashes of lightening that periodically lit up the hill and the facility in the distance.

There was absolutely no way Isak would have run off up in the woods for a joke. He knew his best friend.

He heard a tap on the door. He ignored it. If it was his mom, she could go screw herself. He'd stormed out of dinner, throwing his plate on the floor, and she'd doubtless make him pay for it later. Well, she could wait. The tap continued, and finally he crossed to the door and threw it open.

"What!" he shouted angrily, before he realised that it was Thea's boyfriend.

"Umm," said Even uneasily, "I just came to say goodbye. Your mum's been very kind, but, I think I'm gonna bail."

"She's *not* kind," said Jonas furiously, staring at the floor. "She's not kind at all. She's just making a big deal out of it because Thea's never had a boyfriend before."

Even looked slightly stunned. "Oh, okay," he said, looking a bit embarrassed. "Listen, I'm sorry about your friend. Do you think he's going to be all right?"

Jonas sighed. "I don't know. It's just not *like* him, Even. He doesn't do this kind of thing at all."

Without knowing why, he suddenly started telling Even all about Isak – how they'd become friends in kindergarten because both their names started with V, and how they'd become best friends when Isak's violent, bitter dad walked out on them when Isak was eight, and about Isak's weird mom who never let any of his friends come round to the house, and the party he and the guys were planning for Isak on his sixteenth birthday, a month from now.

"And we're going to invite girls and stuff, and get proper music, and everything," said Jonas excitedly. "It's gonna be amazing. There's no way he'd want to miss that."

"It sounds great." Even gave him a wide smile. "Look, if you want, on my way home I can drive up by the woods track if you want? See if I can see him anywhere?"

Jonas stared at him. He didn't even know this guy, but –

"Actually there's something else I'm worried about," he confessed

quickly. “There’s this group of older boys, and they’re always playing tricks on us and stuff, and I’m scared they’ve done something to Isak.”

“Which older guys?” asked Even. “At school?”

“Yeah, and they call him faggot and fairy and stuff, and – one of them tripped him up in the canteen the other day and everyone laughed. And once they pretended to chase him with the car in the school parking lot, and Isak cut his head, and William only got away with it because his dad practically owns the town.”

“William?” Even was frowning. “William Magnusson?”

“Yeah, the one whose dad owns the facility up on the hill. They’ve got stacks of money and his group of friends are called the Penetrators because of all the girls they, you know,” he said, going slightly red. “I can’t think of any other reason why Isak would have disappeared. And Magnus and Mahdi were really freaked out, so I’m worried that the Penetrators are behind it all.”

Even sighed, and bit his lip. “Well I’m worried that the tyre I fixed for him wouldn’t hold up if he was chased down the woods track,” he said anxiously. “I tell you what – ”

He paused a moment, listening, and from downstairs came the sound of Thea and their mom washing up in the kitchen.

Even passed Jonas a helmet. “Screw it. I’m sure your mom will skin me alive for this, but what the hell. Get on the back.”

She ran.

Eva had never run so fast in her life. She didn’t even remember it was *called* running, she just *did* it, remembering the sensation of her heels pounding the ground and the wind whipping past her cheeks. She ran

and ran, dodging and twisting through the dripping trees, her thin white hospital gown flapping like a shroud around her.

Never again, she thought to herself grimly. *I'm never going back there again.*

Suddenly she skidded to a halt, her bare feet slipping and sliding in the mud. In front of her ran a long, thick, rutted thing, like a stony river. She stopped, uncertainly. A *road*, she thought to herself. Yes, a road. I remember them.

She followed the road for a while but it was harder than the woods, there were sharp stones and pebbles on the track, and ruts and pits that made her trip and stumble.

If they come after me, she thought, they'll use *this*. *I need to get off it now.*

But as she turned to duck back into the bushes, she saw something else. A metal thing, with a banana-shaped seat, decorated with old, patchy stickers that said *Incredible Hulk* and *He-Man*, and on top of it, two large black circles sticking in the air.

She frowned at it, trying to remember.

A *bicycle* it was called, but weren't they usually the other way up?

She pulled at it, and managed to manoeuvre it so that the circles – *tyres*, yes – were on the ground, with the two horn-like things pointing forward. *Handlebars*. As she leaned forward and gripped them, a flood of memory came back to her.

I was riding one of these when they took me. I was pedalling, pedalling really fast, but they still drove up behind me in a black van and took me –

To the endless underground chamber with glass boxes and flickering strip light and the numbers above the barred doors.

I'm not going back there again.

She swung herself onto the seat with renewed purpose, and laughed aloud as her feet hit the pedals and Sana's words came back to her.

It's like riding a bike. You never forget.

"Goodbye, bitches," she murmured to herself as she picked up speed.

She decided to keep off the main road, so she juddered down one of the side-tracks that led off the woods track, but it was an old foresters' road that went nowhere. In front of her were the old ruins of something – a cottage, she thought – with a forest of bramble around it. There was no way out.

Damn, she thought. *I can't cycle through trees.*

But as she turned to drag the bicycle back up the track, she stopped.

The *thing* was there. Behind her, in front of her, around her. She could *feel* it.

A hiss – a tortured, sickening hiss that seemed to suck all the air out of the woods – surrounded her. *You thought you could get away*, it thought at her mockingly. *You can run but you can't hide.*

No, she thought to herself. *I can get away. I can get away from you.*

Try it, it thought back. *Run, and you'll feel my claws in your back.*

Eva stopped. She turned around, clenched her fists, and narrowed her eyes.

Who am I.

I am.

I am Eva Mohn.

The bicycle in front of her exploded in a flash of red-hot metal, the thing sent up a wailing scream and recoiled, the hiss in the air receded, and Eva ran.

"I can't see anything," shouted Even over his shoulder as they bumped along the woods track. "We've been up and down here twice, are you sure this was where they said?"

Jonas clung on, grimly. The rain was lashing down the rutted road so that it was practically a water-course, and Even's tyres slipped and slid through the muddy sludge. "Yeah, they said up by the woods track," he called back. "But I can't see his bicycle anywhere. Mags said he disappeared and left it behind."

"Maybe your dad found it when he was taking them back," said Even, pulling over under the shade of a large tree and kicking the stand into touch. The engine ran down and all that could be heard was the eerie sound of rainswept trees and the distant howling of the wind.

Even pulled off his helmet and shook his hair out, wiping at his eyes with the back of his sleeve. The rain had made his eyeliner run and Jonas thought he would be quite good looking if he didn't cover himself in makeup all the time. Still, he supposed, it seemed to have worked with Thea.

"I can't see any signs of any Penetrators anywhere at least," said Even, doubtfully. "There aren't any fresh motorbike tracks, and if they were partying in the woods they'd have a fire, or we'd see beer cans or something. It just looks deserted."

"Yeah, I know." Jonas shrugged, defeated. Maybe it *was* all some stupid prank of Isak's after all. There was no sign of him anywhere. And he was fifteen after all, he could get himself home well enough from the woods track, it wasn't that far to town, just a mile's hike through the densest part of the wood. They'd all done it before.

"Okay. Well thanks anyway. I guess you'd better take me home."

"Just one more thing," Even coughed embarrassedly. "You said – uh, you said Thea's never had a boyfriend before?"

"Erm," said Jonas, feeling a little floored, "well not that I know of. I know that William asked her out once, but it was a dare or something, and Thea heard about it and knocked him back."

“William?” Even’s eyes darkened. “That guy seems to be coming up a lot today.”

“He comes up a lot in ours,” said Jonas moodily. “He really seems to have it in for Isak, for some reason.”

“He’d better not try anything funny in front of me at school,” said Even, jaw set. “I’ve heard enough about him today to last me a lifetime.”

“At school?” asked Jonas, bewildered. “Backwoods High?” Even nodded. “But I’ve never seen you around there.”

“Well I’ve seen you guys around,” laughed Even. “I knew you were Thea’s brother before I asked her out. And anyway, I only started two weeks ago.”

“You transferred in your final year?” asked Jonas, but Even was already putting on his helmet and kicking down the pedal. The machine roared, shattering the silence.

“Okay,” said Even bluntly, accelerating forward, “let’s go.”

And it was then that the girl ran past.

Jonas stared at her – a girl, running in a hospital shift – barefoot through the woods – running as if her life depended on it. It was only a brief glimpse – fleeing through a thicket behind Even – and in the next second, she was gone.

Jonas grabbed at Even’s shoulder. “Even! Did you see that?”

Even hit the brakes and looked back at him. “See what?”

“The girl! She – ” but even as Jonas looked around, all he could see was darkness, and the cold stony woods track.

He shook his head. Had he been imagining it? There was nothing – nothing but cold wet trees, and the fact that both of them were getting wetter and wetter.

“Let’s go home,” he said, defeated.

The woods track had turned into a flood, as Jonas knew it would, so they had to divert and take one of the lower roads through Backwoods main street. As they passed the village centre, Jonas sat up in interest; all around was a forest of police flashing lights and sirens. The single bridge that led over the waterfall out of Backwoods was cordoned off, and a policeman in yellow vest was diverting traffic.

“Back, back,” shouted the policeman. “No traffic allowed out of Backwoods this evening!”

“Wow,” shouted Jonas in Even’s ear. “Probably been an accident or something.”

Accidents were rare in Backwoods, but you had to get your entertainment somewhere, didn’t you. He looked back, and saw something else; a fleet of dark cars, pulled in at the side next to the roadblock, staffed with drivers in dark glasses and wickedly-large cattle-bumpers. *Facility men*, he’d know them anywhere. What were they doing on the bridge?

They passed the trailer park estate where Isak and his mom lived, known locally as Backwoods Trash Heap. He considered asking Even to stop by to see if Isak had made it home yet – but to be honest, everyone was a little scared of Isak’s mom. You never knew what you’d be getting with her, whether she’d shower you with presents, cry on your shoulder, or throw things at you and tell you to get out. He didn’t fancy knocking on her door and asking her if she’d seen her son recently.

He really hoped that Isak would be home by the time he got back. He’d call him on their special channel on the CB radio set – if his mom didn’t skin him alive first.

The lights were out at home – Thea and his mom always went to bed

early – and he yawned as he climbed wearily off the motorcycle and handed Even back his helmet.

“Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“See you at school,” replied Even, and motored off into the night.

Jonas shook his head – well, if nothing else, he’d had an interesting evening – and made his way quietly into the house, switching the night-lamp on as he did so.

The first thing he noticed was the pool of dirty rain-water on his mom’s clean imitation-wood lino, and the wet bare footprints leading up the stairs to his bedroom.

Jonas sagged against the banister as a flood of relief surged through him.

Isak! He was safe, and had made his way back to Jonas’s. He was obviously as soaked as Jonas was, to be sure. Maybe it *had* been a prank, maybe he’d gotten lost in the woods, but either way, Jonas was just too grateful to worry about it. Whatever, he’d certainly be getting the truth out of Isak for worrying them all like that.

“Isak,” he said, as he pushed open his bedroom door, “what the hell have you been – ”

And stopped dead.

There was a figure standing in the middle of his bedroom, dressed in one of his old jerseys, a pair of his jeans, and holding his bedside clock. For a moment he really thought it *was* Isak, before it glanced up at him with a scowl, like a cat disturbed from its prey, and he stared back in absolute amazement.

It was a girl – about his age – thin, with short cropped dark hair like a boy’s, and angry, dark eyes. It was a moment before he realised she wasn’t holding the clock – it was – it was *levitating* in front of her, floating over her outstretched palm in thin air, before her concentration broke at Jonas’s arrival and it crashed to the ground.

Jonas gaped at the girl soundlessly. She looked vaguely familiar – the

image of the girl running through the woods suddenly flashed up at him – but *how? Why? What was she doing here?*

Then the girl cut her eyes at him, and behind him the door slammed shut by itself.

“Say one word,” she snapped at him – although Jonas had no ability to even *breathe* right now – “and I’ll knock you into the middle of next week.”

TO BE CONTINUED ...

3. The Weirdo of Backwoods Trash Heap

Summary for the Chapter:

Even and Jonas get taunted by William, and what's William's dad playing at with Magnus and Mahdi?

"I dunno, man," said Mahdi, doubtfully as they walked to school the next morning. "After your pop dropped us home, I called Isak like five times on the CB last night, and he didn't answer or anything. It's not like him."

"His bicycle was *gone*, for heaven's sake," replied Magnus, exasperated. "That can only mean he came back and got it after he'd managed to scare the shit out of us. Who else was up in the woods at that time?"

Mahdi shrugged. "You're probably right. I bet he'll be waiting for us in the canteen, laughing his stupid face off."

Jonas walked along behind them, head down, hands thrust deep into his pockets. After the events of last night he was finding it hard to *think* straight, let alone tell the guys about everything that had happened.

"What's up?" Magnus nudged him. "Penny for your thoughts."

The last thing Jonas wanted to tell any of them right now was his *thoughts*. "So my dad didn't go over to Isak's mom?" he quickly deflected. "He didn't check if he got back or anything?"

"I dunno," returned Magnus. "I guess he might have, but he dropped us back first. We drove over the woods path but his bike wasn't where we left it, and – you know, nobody really wants to talk to Isak's mom much, you know?"

Jonas bit his lip. He'd done exactly the same thing yesterday, but Mahdi was suddenly pointing. "Hey look. What's going on over there?"

A fleet of police vehicles were coming down the long road from

Backwoods Hill, past the school gates, followed by a couple of facility cars with their darkened glass, escorting one of those long-wheel-base machine-diggers with something strapped to its trailer.

“Move, move!” the police were shouting. “Let it through! Traffic back up!”

“Oh shit,” shouted Magnus. “Look.”

Strapped to the trailer was the charred, blackened remains of Isak’s bicycle.

Magnus didn’t really remember sprinting up to the trailer where Isak’s bicycle lay – blistered and melted and looking like it had been through some kind of *mangle* – but all of a sudden he found himself beating on it the trailer with his fists and shouting hysterically, “Isak! Isak!”

“Hey kid! Back, back!” shouted a voice, and then hands were on him, dragging him away, and a policeman was suddenly in his face, gripping his collar and mouthing soundless words. All Magnus could see before his eyes, playing over and over like some horrific movie, was the dreadful moment when Isak had somersaulted over the handlebars and vanished, before they heard the noise of the *thing* behind them –

“It’s my friend’s bike!” shouted Magnus desperately. “What’s *happened* to him?”

The policeman – actually on second glance it was a policewoman, a young cadet a few years older than him with orange-blond hair tied up in a stern ponytail – pulled him aside. “Did you say you knew the owner? Does he go to your school?”

“It belongs to Isak Valtersen!” cried Magnus. “We were up in the woods yesterday, and he just – vanished!”

“Vanished? Ok kiddo. Wait here a moment.” The policewoman held his shoulder, reassuringly but firmly, and spoke rapidly into her radio. Magnus caught Mahdi’s fearful glance, and they shared the same look – *what the living hell has happened, has the thing got Isak* – before Jonas suddenly poked them both painfully in the side.

“Ow!” cried Mahdi, and Jonas shook his head at him firmly.

“Look. Isak’s mom’s coming.”

Magnus turned to look, and saw Marianne Valtersen wavering uncertainly towards the school gates through a small crowd of arriving students. She was wearing only a thin dressing gown over a grimy yellow sundress against the raw autumn weather, and white plastic flowered rain boots that reached up to her knees, although it wasn’t raining. Her hair was unbrushed and lay over her shoulders in rats-tails, and her short skirt showed that she hadn’t shaved her legs in months. As she walked past, kids recognised her and either pointed her out mockingly to each other or turned away.

Magnus bit his lip in sympathy. He hadn’t seen Isak’s mom looking this bad for some time. Over the last couple of years they’d not really visited Isak at home, but she was still generally referred to as “that weirdo,” or “the crazy woman from Backwoods Trash Heap,” – the trailer park where most of the families on food stamps lived.

When they were younger, around twelve, she’d once turned up at their school crying hysterically, and wandered around the playground, refusing to be comforted, until Isak was red with embarrassment, and the Principal had had to call the hospital. Another time she’d heard a song on a car radio at a mall park and started dancing like an exciteable fifteen year old in front of a mockingly-encouraging crowd until a mortified Isak had dragged her away.

Isak had gone out by himself from then on.

Magnus actually liked Isak’s mom; way back she had been one of the sweetest people he’d known as a kid, always asking about what he was doing and admiring his crazy inventions when his own parents thought them a waste of time. But after Isak’s dad walked out she’d

started to get funny thoughts.

She'd suddenly been convinced that the chemical facility built up in the woods was a secret mind-control wing of the CIA, and a few months later she was arrested for trying to set a fire at the gates. The judge had leniency though with regard to her mental condition, letting her off with some community service, but it hadn't stopped her going around trying to tell everyone that they were kidnapping children and performing experiments on them up there, which made people's patience wear pretty thin.

They'd put her on some harder meds after that, which made her sleep a lot and lose track of time, and when she was awake she never seemed to really know what was going on, or even be able to brush her hair and wash her face.

"Sheriff!" The policewoman was calling Sheriff Dahl, waving towards Magnus. "We've got a positive ID on the bike, sir, this boy says he knows the owner, but he disappeared up in the woods – "

"Get a statement, Cadet!" shouted back the Sheriff, but at that moment Isak's mom recognised Magnus and came towards them, a strained smile on her face.

"Boys! Hello! It's Magnus isn't it?"

"Hi Mrs. Valtersen," said Magnus, abruptly turning away from the police cadet and walking towards her, as casual and friendly as he could. *Whatever happened, she mustn't see the bike.* "It's so lovely to see you."

"And you too, my darling!" Marianne's eyes were large, green and long-lashed; the only real feature she shared with Isak. She looked as if she'd been crying; there were dark tear-tracks down her cheeks, although it seemed she'd tried to make an effort to make herself presentable and put makeup on that day. She took his hand and pressed it. "How's your family, my darling? How's your lovely mother?"

Magnus swallowed. His own mom had strange turns too from time to time – she'd suddenly start talking too fast and popping too many

slimming pills or self-medicating with alcohol – but *his* father was able to put her discreetly into a hospital *for her nerves* or send her away to stay with relatives upstate *for a little rest*. Isak’s mom wasn’t able to do either of these, and it sometimes seemed to Magnus that the only difference between being called a “weirdo” and “a little highly-strung,” was how much money you had to deal with your problems.

“She’s – uh – well,” he said anxiously. “Is everything all right with you, Mrs. Valtersen?”

Marianne shook her head tearfully. “I’m so worried. Have you seen Isak? He didn’t come back home last night, and I hoped he might have stayed over with one of you guys?”

Mahdi joined them, his wide, panicked eyes signalling some kind of message to Magnus – what it was, he didn’t know – and Magnus had *no* idea how to answer for a long awful moment – and that’s when Marianne saw the scorched bicycle carcass on the parked trailer and sent up a horrified wail.

“Oh my God! Isak! Isak!”

The cadet ran over and gripped Magnus’s shoulder. “Who’s this? The mother?”

Magnus nodded, his heart sinking. “Yes, but be careful, she’s very fragile.”

“What’s happened?” wailed Isak’s mom frantically. “Where’s Isak?”

“Sir, the mother!” cried the cadet, and Sheriff Dahl came instantly over, taking off his warm trooper’s greatcoat and putting it around Marianne’s shoulders. “Mrs. Valtersen,” he said sympathetically.

Isak’s mom had had a lot of run-ins with the police when she started to lose it, but to the sheriff’s credit he never lost sight of the fact that she was a person, not a problem. “Shall we go somewhere and talk?”

“No!” screamed back Isak’s mom. “Where’s Isak! What’s happened to his bicycle??”

The Sheriff hesitated. “There was a huge electric storm last night,” he said carefully. “We’re investigating the possibility that this bike was hit by lightning.”

“Hit by lightning?” Marianne gazed at him, horrified. “Is Isak – hurt?”

Dahl took her arm gently. “Why don’t we go somewhere else and discuss this, Mrs. Valtersen?”

Marianne wrenched her arm away. “What’s happened to him? Where have you taken him?”

The Sheriff looked uneasy. “We haven’t found him, I’m afraid. He may have been caught by the storm in the woods by the facility last night – there was lightning damage to both the facility and certain other areas – and we’ll be investigating all possibilities to get Isak back to you, Mrs. Valtersen, we – ”

“A storm?” Marianne’s mouth fell open. “In the woods? By the facility?”

Her roving eyes lit on a couple of facility men, standing quietly in their dark suits next to their dark cars, and jabbed a finger at them. Magnus recognised one of them as square-jawed Mr. Magnusson, the owner of the facility.

“It’s them! They’re behind it!!”

“Mrs. Valtersen – ” began the Sheriff, scenting trouble, but Marianne was already stumbling towards them, grasping angrily at the white shirt of the nearest facility man. “They took Isak! Arrest them!”

“Oh crap,” moaned Magnus, and took off running after her, at the same time as the police cadet, but Isak’s mom moved faster than they did. “Be gentle with her!” he shouted, but it was too late, Marianne had already slashed across Mr. Magnusson’s face with her nails, before the policewoman grabbed her and pinioned her from behind. A cry rose up from the crowd of watching students, in the middle of it Isak’s mom screaming and twisting, trying to throw off the cadet.

“They’ve taken Isak! It’s them! It’s them!”

“Get off you mad bitch!” spat out Mr. Magnusson, dabbing at his cheek with his handkerchief. “Somebody clap you in the mental hospital where you belong!”

“Oh God, what a mess,” groaned Sheriff Dahl, shouldering his large form into the scuffle with the policewoman. “Sonja, be gentle with her, please, she’s grieving. Can you drive her down to the station at once, and take her statement about where and when she last saw her son. And *you* – ” he turned on Magnus with frightening speed, “I’ll need to interview you and anyone else who was up in the woods last night. Come with me to the Principal’s office immediately.”

Jonas stood dumbstruck as Sheriff Dahl led off Magnus, and Mahdi, with a terrified backward glance, joined them, leaving him waiting awkwardly behind. He watched helplessly as the police cadet finally persuaded Mrs. Valtersen into the back of her car with difficulty, and a medic cleaned up Mr. Magnusson’s face. The facility boss’s eyes were black with fury, and a few of the students turned away to hide their smiles. Mr. Magnusson and his son William were not particularly loved in Backwoods.

I want to interview anyone who was up in the woods last night.

Jonas swallowed nervously. Yes, he had been in the woods last night with Even, looking for Isak – and he would have volunteered this information freely to the sheriff, had it not been for – the girl.

The girl who had run past him wearing a white hospital gown, the girl who he’d found hiding in his bedroom wearing his own jumper and jeans, the girl who made his old bedside clock *float in the air*, the girl who –

I have to go back and see her, he thought to himself. *I can’t leave her home alone, what on earth was I thinking*, and with this decision made, he turned around and almost cannoned straight into Even.

Jonas almost didn't recognise him at first – Even obviously toned down his unconventional look *a lot* for school; he'd washed the pink tint from his fair hair and only wore the *slightest* trace of mascara – but underneath his denim jacket he wore a Freddie Mercury t-shirt and a slim black leather studded punk collar as if he were a roadie for the Sex Pistols.

Jonas still couldn't figure how a boy like this had gotten together with *Thea*, of all people.

"Hullo," said Even, looking nonplussed at the crowd gathered around the trailer. "What's going on?"

"Isak didn't come back home last night," confessed Jonas, and Even looked shocked. "No one knows where he is. They found his bicycle, and *Even* – it's all burned up. The Sheriff thinks it was hit by lightning."

The older boy bit his lip. "Oh God, no. Where did they find the bike? We rode all over the track last night and we didn't find anything."

"I dunno," confessed Jonas, "but maybe he rode off somewhere else between Magnus and Mahdi coming back and before we went out – I dunno."

"What do you think?" Even's blue eyes were dark and serious. "Do you still think the Penetrators are still behind it?"

Jonas shrugged helplessly. There was just too much going *on* right now. "I can't tell, Even, I really can't."

Even was suddenly looking over his shoulder. "So was that – is that the mother over there?"

Jonas followed his gaze, and saw Marianne weeping helplessly in the back seat of the cadet's car as it motored past them, honking at the stragglers in the crowd of gawkers.

"Yeah," said Jonas. "But she's kind of crazy, like I said. She thinks all sorts of weird things. Just now she said that Mr. Magnusson had taken Isak away to experiment on him, or something, and she scratched him up good. She's a bit of a nutter, really."

He wasn't sure why, but he felt Even stiffen slightly and his face reddened as if he'd been slapped. "Well, she seems to love him very much," was all he said in response.

"Come on, boys!" Mr. Eksett was standing at the gates, waving them in frantically. "School's about to start!"

Oh crap. Jonas's plan to head back home bit the dust under the eyes of the stern teacher, and he meekly fell into step with Even as they hurried up the school drive. He'd have to skip out at lunch, or something, he'd have to –

"Hey faggot!" A voice broke into his thoughts abruptly, and he looked up to see the unwelcome form of William Magnusson grinning at Even from the hall doors. "Found yourself a boyfriend at last, have you?"

"Leave us alone," said Even curtly, not looking at him. "We've got bigger problems than you to deal with."

"Bored of Thea already?" needled William, walking at their heels. "Wondered when you'd finally move onto her brother. I reckon - "

Even whirled around to face him, and Jonas was surprised at the sudden fierce anger blazing through him. "Shut up, Magnusson. I've had enough of your crap."

"Going to hit me, are you?" taunted William, delighted. "C'mon. Throw me one of your fairy punches. Let's see what you got."

Even was taut with fury, and he really *looked* like he wanted to knock William flying but he controlled himself with an effort. "You'd better not have had anything to do with last night or I literally will *kill you*," he shot back, in a voice so menacing and cold that William, for all his bravado, looked momentarily thrown.

"What happened last night?"

"Boys!" Mr. Eksett was coming through the doors. "What are you doing? Get into class now!"

"Just on my way, sir," replied William with a return of his shit-eating

grin, and they watched him saunter off. Jonas noticed that Even was trembling so hard with fury that he could hardly hold his books.

“It’s all right,” said Jonas, wanting to reassure him. “He calls Isak a faggot all the time, it doesn’t mean he actually thinks you *are*. He’s probably a faggot himself, the way he keeps going on about it all the time.”

“Maybe. I’ve got to go.” Even snapped, and stalked off, leaving Jonas standing alone in the corridor, somewhat bewildered at his new friend’s reaction.

He hadn’t said anything that bad – *had* he?

“Right,” said the Sheriff, sitting on the edge of the Principal’s desk. “Let’s hear about everything that happened when you guys decided to go up in the woods, shall we?”

“Aren’t – ” Mahdi was looking uncomfortable. “Aren’t our parents meant to be here, or something? When we get asked questions by the police?”

“A responsible adult is all you need,” the Principal said easily. “And I can fulfil that as your head teacher. If, however, you’d prefer to go down to the station for questioning – ”

“No, sir,” said Mahdi quickly, and the Principal smiled. “Wise boy.”

Haltingly, Magnus filled in the story of how they came to cycle back from Jonas’s house together, and Mahdi interjected occasionally when he left something out, but when he came to *Isak disappeared as he hit the ground* the Principal made a puffing noise of derision with his lips, and when they got to describing the *thing*, Magnus suddenly found he didn’t have words enough to describe it.

“It kind of had no *face*, sir,” he said, earnestly. “And it wasn’t what it

looked like that was so scary, it was – ”

“It was how it made you *feel*,” supplied Mahdi, and Magnus nodded quickly. He’d had the exact same feeling; the sensation of dread, shame and utter, abject fear.

“Might have been a trick, perhaps?” asked the Sheriff curiously. “A kid wearing a mask, maybe? Halloween’s coming up, there must be lots of practical jokes being played on you guys out there.”

Magnus considered. It *could* have been a mask – a very scary, realistic mask – but then he remembered the hideous, skeletal body, and the long, twisted limbs it dragged itself around on. No one he knew had the body shape to fit a costume like *that*.

“No, sir,” he whispered. “It was real. I can’t say how I know, sir. I just *know*.”

“Where did you find the bike, sir?” asked Mahdi, puzzled.

Sheriff Dahl looked evasive. “That’s classified, I’m afraid,” he said, and Magnus thought that line sounded *straight* out of the movies. “I mean, I can’t comment on an investigation, I’m sure you understand.”

A knock on the door sounded, and the Principal looked up. “Come in,” he pronounced grandly, and the tall form of Mr. Magnusson came in, his face all patched up from where Isak’s mom had scratched him. He looked at the boys with disdain.

“Are these the ones?” he asked.

Magnus gazed back at him in surprise, and the Sheriff explained. “Mr. Magnusson’s facility was damaged last night as well. We’re looking into the possibility that it was hit by lightning too, or possibly damaged by persons unknown, so we’re questioning all witnesses who were in the area at the time. He’s got a few questions he’d like to ask you boys, if that’s all right with you.”

Mahdi and Magnus exchanged looks – *what the hell is going on* – and Magnus nodded slowly, because, really, what else was there to do?

“Did you see anyone up by the facility while you were cycling?”

asked Mr. Magnusson, tapping a cigarette out of a leather case and lighting it.

“Only the *thing*,” said Magnus, and Mr. Magnusson looked at the Sheriff curiously. “The *thing*?” And then Magnus had to explain again, and once more the words wouldn’t come when he wanted them to, and he was conscious of just how weird and well – *thin* – this story sounded.

Mr. Magnusson frowned. “Not someone of your own age then? A girl, perhaps? With short brown hair, wearing a white dress?”

Magnus’s round face was a study in confusion. “A girl? No, sir. We didn’t see any girls at all.”

“We didn’t see any girls,” confirmed Mahdi. “I’d have remembered, sir, believe me.”

The Sheriff showed his notes to Mr. Magnusson. “Might she have been wearing a mask, sir? Or impersonating something or someone?”

Mr. Magnusson shrugged, but shook his head. “We’ll discuss later. In the meantime, you let us know if your friend turns up.”

“Back to school, boys,” said the Principal smoothly. “Keep your mouths shut as well in the meantime, until we’ve got all of this cleared up.”

“Yes, sir,” stammered Magnus and Mahdi, and got the hell out of there *real fast*.

Eva lay on her back on the boy’s bed, staring up at the ceiling.

She was tired but she couldn’t sleep. Since her flight from the facility she’d been on high-alert, using all her mental strength to search out and probe against any surrounding dangers. But in the dark-haired

boy's house she had felt, for the first time, safe.

The dark-haired boy had been shocked – scared, even, when he came in and saw her standing there. She smiled at the memory. He seemed sweet, though a little moody, and it had been relatively easy to lean the force of her character gently against him, making him wish to help her without understanding why.

“My name’s Jonas,” he’d stammered, sitting on the bed watching her poke curiously around his bedroom, looking at his videos, his Atari game set, his posters of some woman with white-bleached hair and red lipstick. “What’s yours?”

Eva had considered before replying. The power of a name was something she was just getting used to, and she wasn’t going to give *that* away too easily.

“E,” she said finally, and Jonas had frowned, not understanding. “E? Like the letter?”

“Exactly like the letter,” Eva had said, and wolfed down the ham sandwich and glass of milk that he’d filched for her from the kitchen on her unspoken request.

“Erm, where do you want to sleep, E?” said the boy, hesitantly. “If you want to take the bed, I can, um, sleep on the floor, if that’s not too weird?”

Eva shook her head, and pointed under Jonas’s bed. “There.”

“Underneath my bed?” Jonas’s eyebrows had wandered around his forehead for a while as he took in the idea of a strange girl sleeping underneath him. “Okay, I can get you a blanket or something.”

Eva shook her head for the second time, and pulled his duvet off the mattress, forming a small squirrels-nest on the floor beneath the bed with his pillow and a couple of cushions. It was comfortable enough, but the spine of a book was sticking into her when she lay down – no, a magazine. She fished it out and peered at it curiously.

Playboy, it said, and there was a laughing girl on the front wearing not too many clothes.

Jonas snatched it away before she could open it.

“Or you could – okay, no problem. You’re sure you’re comfortable under there?”

I feel safe under here, Eva signalled at him from her cave. *Sleep now. I’ll let you know when you can help me again.*

And now the dark-haired boy had gone to school, subtly encouraged by Eva to leave her alone for a while, and now she had to tackle the problem that she’d been avoiding for too long.

Where was Sana? Had she managed to escape during the storm?

She let her mind detach from the dark-haired boy, unhook itself from the Outside, sending her thoughts out searching lazily like probing tentacles for Sana’s presence, whilst all around her the walls of the bedroom thinned and swayed, turning from Mrs. Vazquez’s crisp lemon-yellow paint to the sickening brown ochre of the Underneath. Instead of the cleanly-built shelves and the tall ceiling of Jonas’s room, haggard branches and a leaden sky formed around her. She smelled the scent of decay, and heard the hiss of nameless, crawling things in the undergrowth.

“Help! Help!” A voice was shouting, small and distant, from one of the thickets of the Underneath. “Is anyone here?”

Eva hesitated. The voice sounded the same as the fair-haired boy she’d seen on her breakout from the facility – when she was coming through the Underneath for the first time. She still remembered the confused look of panic on his face, and his pleading voice was young and scared. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she could hear sobs. Eva knew about panic; she’d spent a lot of time in the Underneath when *they* forced her to.

But to find the fair-haired boy she’d have to go deeper into the Underneath. And she wasn’t going back *there* in a hurry, not by a long chalk.

Not this way.

Eva turned her mind around with an effort, and the twisted forms of

the Underneath and the boy's distant cries receded around her. She blinked back up at the clean, white-painted ceiling, forcing herself to think clearly.

There was another way to contact Sana – using the dark *Inbetween* world that *they* had introduced her to – where only their minds could meet and talk without their physical bodies being present; a dark, echoing chamber that lay between the worlds of the Underneath and the Outside.

It was a risk, using the Inbetween, because *They* were able to listen in, although not control what went on in there – but there was no other way. She had to be careful what information she gave away, so that *They* had no way of hunting her down in the Outside.

She shifted positions, let her thoughts drift.

Sana, she murmured quietly. *Are you there?*

And while she was lying there, unheeding of the soft footsteps that had come quietly up the stairs as she concentrated, the door suddenly opened and she screamed.

Author's Note:

Will – Isak

Mike – Jonas

Lucas – Mahdi

Dustin – Magnus

Steve – Even

Eva - Eleven

Sana - Eight

Thea - Nancy